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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the preaching of William Ellery Channing and Theordore Parker as it contributed to the theological development of American intellectual life. Employing Cathcart's concept of "dialectical enjoinment," this study suggests that Channing and Parker exerted a restricted emphasis because communication with the larger ecclesiastical establishment was restricted and restrained. During the early nineteenth century, while pietistic revivalism emphasized personal subjective religious experience and scholastic orthodoxy formulated theological interest and content, Channing and Parker examined the relationship between individual experience and logical reason. Channing demanded and demonstrated freedom of thought and expression, contending that his theological and rhetorical purpose was the liberation of thinking from theological servitude. Parker became the prominent Transcendentalist preacher. The epistemology of Parker and Channing developed as a challenge to Unitarian trust in the sufficiency of reason as ultimate authority in theological specualtion and the possibility of dialectical enjoinment was thereby diminished. (LL)

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WILLIAM ELLERY CHANNING AND THEODORE PARKER

A Study In Dialectical Enjoinment

Daniel Ross Chandler

The liberal religious movement which developed early in America constituted a theological emphasis which spread through several Protestant denominations and emerged outside the traditional ecclesiastical establishment as an independent movement. Religious liberalism provided an approach to epistemological problems and pragmatic problem solving, a philosophical attitude which individuals held toward organized society, and a methodology for creating and conducting institutions. Concerned with a source of ultimate authority in theological speculation, many liberals asserted the primacy of reason, remained hospitable toward mysticism, and renounced arbitrary separations between "secular" and "sacred" knowledge. The decline of eighteenth century Protestantism and a growing appreciation of a distinctive universal humanism encouraged liberal efforts to establish "the Kingdom" as an inner righteousness and as social justice. Employing scientific methods, some studied the scriptures and compared the world religions with their attempts to unify religious knowledge with man's accumulating information and to nurture an unfettered human brotherhood through a comprehensive inclusive fellowship. Genuine religion for the liberal was a qualitative dimension of immediate experience which enriched personal life and changed human society.

This historical-rhetorical study engaged the preaching of William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker as it contributed to the theological development of American intellectual life. Employing Cathcart's concept of "dialectical enjoinment", this study suggests that Channing and Parker exerted a restricted

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emphasis because communication with the larger ecclesiastical establishment was restricted and restrained. Cathcart explained that inaugurating a movement requires spokesmen who advocate an immediate corrective for an existing situation and a reciprocal symbolic response from counter persuaders through dialectical enjoinment.[1] Further, as a study in intellectual history, this investigation was guided and governed by Higham's philosophy that intellectual history as historical knowledge concerns "how and why particular human experiences have followed one another through time" with the distinctive objective of describing and explaining the spirit of an age.[2] Identifying three types of intellectual history, Higham explained that one acknowledges and appreciates cultural accomplishments and achievements; another contributes toward a general historical understanding that reveals a particular generation; and a third examines neither action nor art but thought and feeling. Discovering what humans thought and felt requires using imaginative sympathy, not attempting to objectify previous experience but to understand historical development. Detaching himself "objectively" and avoiding "subjective" entanglement, Higham maintained, an historian can not participate wholeheartedy and identify completely with human thought and feeling.

Several contemporary historians employed concepts such as "identify" and "toleration" when they studied the intellectual development of American religion. Perry Miller maintained that from the early nineteenth century, the American quest for an identity became a complicated activity because "instead of being the hope of the enlightened world, America found itself naked of legends, primitive virtues, archaic origins."[3] Around 1720, the original intention to perpetuate

religious uniformity and tradition-oriented identity was frustrated; creating a climate for a distinctive American religious persuasion required a prolonged upheaval which included the evangelical revivals along the Western frontier. Mead stated that the perpetuation of religious uniformity was undermined by the expanded geographical distance, complicated enmeshing self-interest, practical necessity, and pressures exerted from the motherland.[4] The removal of traditional civil and ecclesiastical restrictions upon religious expression and the stretching geographical distance provided an ideological setting which invited innovation. A particular Protestant ethos was encouraged by the pioneering frontiersmen:

> They found it in the Bible, which as the commonly recognized Word of God, they proposed to place directly in the hands of the Spirit-guided individual Christian as his only necessary guide to faith and practice....In practice this meant appeal over the authority of all churches and historical traditions subsequently developed to the authority of the beliefs and and practices of primitive Christianity as pictured in the New Testament.[5]

Abroad through the wilderness nation were the convictions that although returning to primitive and normative Christianity was preferable, intervening history contained theological corruptions and ecclesiastical distortions. Fresh beginnings could commence in a new nation. Asserting diverse authority, some Pietists assumed that personal conversion duplicated New Testament experience while rationalistic reformers appealed directly to Jesus' teachings unencumbered by theological interpretations and explanations. Mead concluded that the oversimplification of theological contentions, placing primary emphasis upon

upon personal experience, the revivalistic orientation upon numerical results, and an anti-rational reaction influenced the intellectual milieu of American religious experience. Mead mentioned:

> By and large, except for Unitarians, the bulk of American Protestantism turned against the ethos of the Enlightenment, and thereafter found itself either indifferent to or in active opposition to the general spirit and intellectual currents of modern western civilization. Thereafter the bulk of American Protestantism was moulded primarily by pietistic revivalism and scholastic orthodoxy.[6]

While pietistic revivalism emphasized personal subjective religious experience and scholastic orthodoxy formulated theological interest and content, William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker examined the relationship between individual experience and logical reason. Through their preaching, Channing and Parker established a theoretical foundation undergirding a distinctive religious persuasion.

William Ellery Channing

Born in Newport, Rhode Island, on April 7, 1780, Channing completed his undergraduate education in Harvard College during 1798, spent two years following his graduation as a tutor in Virginia, and became a Harvard regent in 1801. Channing studied Christianity critically, attempting to discern Jesus' teachings from subsequent theological interpretations. Having ministered at Medford, Channing was ordained pastor of the Federal Street Church in Boston during 1803. His association with Unitarians was casual; Channing considered himself "little of a Unitarian". Channing's sermon "Unitarian Christianity" provided a veritable constitution which crystalized American Unitarianism as

a distinctive liberal persuasion. Powerfully Channing described the independent inquisitive intelligence which Unitarians stressed when he preached an 1830 election sermon:

> I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which calls no man master, which does not content itself with a passive or hereditary faith, which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come, which receives new truth as an angel from heaven, which, whilst consulting others, inquires still more of the oracle within itself, and uses instructions from abroad not to supersede but to quicken and exalt its own energies.[7]

Channing demanded and demonstrated freedom of thought and expression, contending that his theological and rhetorical purpose was the liberation of the thinking intelligence from theological servitude. Unreasonable and unempassioned conformity was renounced with an insistance upon spiritual growth through personal freedom; Channing's affirmation avowed that individuals can utilize intellectual and spiritual freedom with responsibility and discipline.[8] Although Channing was not predominately a Transcendentalist when compared with Emerson and Parker,[9] he nevertheless labored to encourage New Englanders to discern spiritual potentialities within themselves.[10] Channing's social consciousness was recognized and respected by Parker:

> He saw that we live in a state unchristian and not rational; that wars prevail, and must be prepared for; that we prevent crime by remedies almost as bad as the disease; that laws do not reach all offenders, perhaps not the most heinous; that the goods of society

> do not always fall into the hands of their primitive owners; that some men are losers by what we call civilization; that laws and institutions do not always make us more free, but weave webs of conventionalism about us, belittling the might of man.[11]

Theodore Parker

Born in Lexington, Massachusetts, on August 24, 1810, Parker read widely, learned languages, and exhibited keen perception. In 1830 this self-educated scholar walked to Cambridge and passed the Harvard entrance examinations. Although he could not afford the financial sum required for regular enrollment, Parker was permitted to take the academic examinations nevertheless. He was awarded an honorary masters degree during 1840. In March, 1831, Parker became an assistant working in a private Boston school; the following year he opened his own school in Watertown. He entered Harvard Divinity School in April, 1834, and graduated in July, 1836. During his Harvard years, he acknowledged the sacred scriptures as divinely inspired, accepted revelation as evidenced with miracles, and appreciated Jesus as the Son of God. Long hours of teaching, studying for examinations, and learning the Semitic languages were combined with a courtship of Lydia Cabot, whom he married in April, 1837. Parker was ordained in West Roxbury on June 21, 1837.

Theodore Parker became the prominent Transcendentalist preacher. Greatly impressed and influenced when he heard Emerson deliver his Divinity School address, Parker studied German philosophy and criticism and read from Coleridge and Carlyle. Under a pseudonum Levi Blodgett, he published a pamphlet contending that

an intuitive capacity within humans renders external supporting evidence unnecessary in theological speculation. Parker's "The Transient And Permanent In Christianity", preached in Boston's Hawes Place Church during 1841, stated that Christianity contained two elements. The transient is "the thought, the folly, the uncertain wisdom, the theological notions, the impiety of man."[13] The permanent is "absolute, pure morality; absolute, pure religion; the love of man; the love of God acting without let or hindrance."[14] Recognizing that "heresy of one age is the orthodox belief and 'only infallable rule' of the next,"[15] Parker championed uncompromised and unimpeachible intellectual integrity:

> Terror has sometimes palsied tongues that, before, were eloquent as the voice of persuasion....You may hire your servants to preach as you bid; to spare your vices, and flatter your follies; to prophesy smooth things, and say, It is peace, when there is no peace. Yet in so doing you weaken and enthral yourselves. And alas for the man who consents to think one thing in his closet and preach another in his pulpit![16]

Parker insisted that, "Christianity is not a system of doctrines, but rather a method for attaining oneness with God."[17] While a rejection or refinement of doctrine and dogma became characteristic of liberal religion, the emphasis upon the intuitive relationship between the person and God was distinctive in New England Transcendentalism.

Parker became a storm-center generating growing theological controversy. When Parker published an article in The Dial during 1842, members of the Boston ministerial association were disturbed and disquieted. When these colleagues asked Parker to resign his membership in 1843, he declined, declaring that

intellectual freedom and integrity were the issues. Denials of customary pulpit exchanges prevented dialectical enjoinment during a Unitarian effort to isolate the Transcendentalist contagion and prevent the infectious disease from spreading. In November, 1844, Sargent invited Parker to preach in a mission chapel, but the Fraternity of Churches intervened, and Sargent resigned his pulpit. The regulations governing the lecture in First Church, Boston, were revised, excluding Parker from possible participation. When Clarke exchanged pulpits with Parker, some members seceded from the congregation.

Support for Parker came from outside the clergy. While orthodox churchmen criticized Parker through the press, Boston laymen arranged for Parker to present a lecture series. A Discourse of Matters Pertaining to Religion contained Parker's understanding of Christianity as the highest evolutionary ascent of the direct human experience of divinity and his demand for a theology which interprets the immanence of the Divine. In December, 1845, Boston gentlemen resolved that Theodore Parker shall be heard. In January, Parker resigned his West Roxbury ministry and became the pastor serving the newly organized Twenty-Eighth Congregational Society which assembled in Boston's Music Hall. When the old wineskins of rational Unitarianism burst with the new wines of Transcendental philosophy, Parker refused regimentation within the Unitarian movement. In his 1845 installation sermon, Parker proclaimed:

> The church that is to lead this century will not be a church creeping on all fours; mewling and whining, its face turned down, its eyes turned back. It must be full of the brave, manly spirit of the day, keeping also the good of times past....But the church which

> did for the fifth century, or the fifteenth, will not do for this. What is well enough at Rome, Oxford, or Berlin, is not well enough for Boston....
>
> A church that believes in inspiration now will appeal to God; try things by reason and conscience; aim to surpass the old heroes; baptize its children with a new spirit, and using the present age will lead public opinion, and not follow it.[18]

Speaking in Boston's renown Faneuil Hall, on different occasions he denounced Senator Webster's March Seventh Speech, renounced the Fugitive Slave Law, and pronounced encouragement for his audience to rescue Anthony Burns. Separated from Unitarians as minister serving his independent autonomous congregation, Parker refused to resign from the ministry.[19] As a "prince of the pulpit" Theodore Parker introduced German higher criticism into American theological scholarship, encouraged religious enlightenment by speaking across America, applied his religious convictions to contemporary social problems anticipating the social gospel movement, and recognized intuition as the ultimate source of authority in theological speculation. This nineteenth century Bostonian championed the claims and causes which were highlighted by two prominent twentieth century preachers, Harry Emerson Fosdick at the Riverside Church in New York and Preston Bradley at the Peoples Church of Chicago.

Impediments To Enjoinment

Drawing upon the history and literature about colonial America, this study suggests that the chronological development of liberal religion as an historical movement gained impetus when a ideological condusiveness developed

within a wilderness democracy. Political separation from England invited religious freedom, a quest for identity, an atmosphere of tolerance, and controversy concerning theological authority. Structural strain developed when eighteenth century New England Congregationalism was challenged by Unitarianism rationalism and again when nineteenth century Unitarianism was confronted by New England Transcendentalists who reacted or rebeled against Unitarianism with an emphatic assertion of intuitive experience. Developing from the Protestant Reformation through secular liberalism, New England Transcendentalism as suggested by Channing and furthered by Parker represented a revolt against Unitarianism:

> The Transcendentalists characterized the Unitarians as cold, capriciously fretful academicians who rejected Puritan theology with unstinting exactness. The charge by Parker and his associates was specific--the Unitarians had abandoned the emotional prayer and psalm of their forefathers, and in their place had put cold cynicism and sterile disbelief.[20]

The Transcendentalists ripped unmercifully at the philosophical principles sustaining Unitarianism and formulated a synthesis which considered genuine religion as a universal spiritual experience. New England Transcendentalism was distinguished by an epistemology which claimed that through immediate intuited inspiration human individuals experience the encompassing unification throughout phenomenonal reality. Hockfield explained that Transcendentalism asserted that "consciousness itself is a reliable source of spiritual insight, that in man's mind, by virtue of its native, inherent capacities, the fundamental truths of religion can be found."[21] Goddard explained:

> Transcendentalism was, then, first and foremost, a doctrine concerning the mind, its ways of acting and methods of getting knowledge....The philosophy teaches the unity of the world in God and the immanence of God in the world....This may occur in two ways: either directly, in states which vary from the ordinary perception of truth to moments of mystical rapture in which there is a conscious influx of the divine into the human; or indirectly, through the instrumentality of nature.[22]

Predicated upon this epistemology, the Transcendentalism of Channing and especially Parker developed as a challenge to Unitarian trust in the sufficiency of reason as ultimate authority in theological speculation.

The epistemological distinctiveness which characterized New England Transcendentalism restricted or restrained dialectical enjoinment with the traditional rationalistic Unitarians because each school had referents in different conceptions of the nature of phenomenal reality. As a liberal religious philosophy, New England Transcendentalism grew not from literary sources such as sacred scriptures which liberal Christians cherished, but from immediate intuition supposedly superior to discursive reasoning. While some Transcendentalists "became excited, rather intodicated, by the new literature of England and of the Continent,"[23] attributing Romantic English literature or Oriental philosophical treatises as the sources of Transcendentalism denies the essential characteristic of that New England experience. Immediate awareness, not literary expressions, was fundamental[24]

Alienation and estrangement of Channing and Parker from their Unitarian colleagues diminished the possibility for dialectical enjoinment. Neither was

esteemed and respected by institutional representatives or denominational leaders who were "disquited by mysticism, enthusiasm and rapture."[25] Correctly Goddard concluded that Channing remained a new breed:

> But if Channing was a Unitarian, he was one of an entirely new type; and with him - if we are to give him that name - the continuity of Unitarian development seems almost broken. Indeed the more one studues his character and beliefs in relation to his time, the more one must feel that he was scarcely a Unitarian at all, but rather the first of the transcendentalists.[26]

This discontinuity between the Unitarians and the Transcendentalism is evidenced by the resignations of Emerson and Ripley from the Unitarian ministry, Brownson's post-Unitarian ministry through his Society for Christian Unity, and Parker's near excommunication from Boston Unitarians.[27] Unfortunately, the Transcendentalists never developed an enduring rhetorical-communicative vehicle for the continuing proclamation of their liberal religious philosophy.

A liberal religious individualism was encouraged by rational Unitarians and intuitive Transcendentalists. Many adherents within both schools believed that their intellectual sophistication and epistemological orientation were suited to an enlightened minority, not to the general population or a mass audience. In a frontier democracy which glorified the common sense of the common man, neither the rational thinking of Unitarianism nor the mystical insight of Transcendentalism secured a widespread following. Instead the Bible bearing circuit rider became the popular figure of frontier Protestantism.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Robert S. Cathcart, "New Approaches to the Study of Movements: Defining Movements Rhetorically," Western Speech XXXVI (Spring, 1972), pp. 82-88.

[2] John Higham, "American Intellectual History: A Critical Appraisal," American Quarterly, XII (1961), pp. 220-221.

[3] Perry Miller, "The Shaping Of The American Character," The New England Quarterly XXVIII (December, 1955), p. 449.

[4] Sidney E. Mead, "From Coercion To Persuasion: Another Look At The Rise Of Religious Liberty And The Emergence Of Denominationalism," Church History XXV (1956), p. 317. See Perry Miller, "The Contribution of the Protestant Churches to Religious Liberty in America," Church History IV (March, 1935), pp. 57-66.

[5] Sidney E. Mead, "Denominationalism: The Shape of Protestantism in America," Church History XXIII (December, 1954), p. 296.

[6] Ibid., p. 311.

[7] William E. Channing, "Spiritual Freedom," The Works of William E. Channing D. D. (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1875), p. 174.

[8] Conrad Wright, Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing - Emerson - Parker (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 44.

[9] Conrad Wright, The Liberal Christians (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), p. 23.

[10] Irving H. Bartlett, "Introduction," William Ellery Channing: Unitarian Christianity and Other Essays (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957), pp. xx-xxv.

[11] Theodore Parker, "William Ellery Channing," Theodore Parker: An Anthology Edited, with an Introduction and Notes, by Henry Steele Commager (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 81.

[12] Henry Steele Commager, Theodore Parker: Yankee Crusader (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1936), p. 66.

[13] Theodore Parker, "The Transient and Permanent in Christianity," Theodore Parker: An Anthology, p. 41.

[14] Ibid., p. 56.

[15] Ibid., p. 44.

[16] Ibid., p. 62.

[17] Ibid., p. 57.

[18] Theodore Parker, "The True Idea of a Christian Church," Theodore Parker: An Anthology, p. 87.

[19] Commager, Theodore Parker: An Anthology, p. 1.

[20] Irving Jacob Rein, "The New England Transcendentalists: Rhetoric of Paradox" (Unpublished dissertation, University of Pittsburg, 1966), p. 28. See Conrad Wright, The Liberal Christians, p. 37. Consult two books by Stow Persons, Free Religion (New Haven: Yale, 1947), p. 108, and American Minds (New York: Henry Holt, 1958), p. 209.

[21] George Hochfield, Selected Writings of the American Transcendentalists (New York and Toronto: The New American Library, 1966), p. xv.

[22] Harold Clarke Goddard, Studies in New England Transcendentalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1908), p. 4.

[23] Perry Miller, The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), p. ix.

[24] Hochfield, Selected Writings, p. x. See Arthur Christy, The Orient in American Transcendentalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), pp. 182-183.

[25] Octavius Brooks Frothingham, Transcendentalism in New England: A History (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 110.

[26] Goddard, Studies, p. 27.

[27] Hochfield, Selected Writings, p. xxi.